

Oral Verse-Making in Homer's *Odyssey*

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I. The Variety of Tales

The exploration of oral poetry over the past sixty years has inevitably turned scholars' interest to Homer, who offers two very lively, highly poeticized, portraits of oral poets in his *Odyssey*: Phemius, the singer for the family of Laertes in its ancestral hall on the island of Ithaca, and Demodocus, the blind singer of tales for the fabulously glamorous Phaeacians in remote Scheria. These two singers, accompanied by a lyre, performing narrative songs about the Trojan expedition, the returns from Troy, and the escapades of gods and goddesses, provide entertainment during banquets. Demodocus receives the longer introduction:

The herald came near leading the excellent singer, whom the Muse loves above all, and gave him both good and evil; she took away his eyes but gave him the gift of sweet song. Then Pontonoo placed a silver-studded chair for him in the midst of the feasters, setting it against a tall column. He hung the clear-sounding lyre on a peg above his head and showed him how to take it in his hands. Nearby he placed a basket and a beautiful table, and a cup of wine to drink whenever his spirit urged him. The others put forth their hands to the good food that lay before them, and when they had put away their desire for drinking and eating, the Muse urged the singer to sing of men's glories, the tale whose fame rises up into broad heaven.¹

(*Odyssey* 8.62-74)

The function of these poets, at least on the level of plot, seems no more serious than entertainment. The necessity for such singers to provide entertainment is made clear on three occasions when their song fails to entertain. Twice, when Alcinoos notices that one of his guests is not enjoying the song but is weeping, he stops the singer and introduces other

¹ Translations by the author.

types of entertainment. When Phemius sings about the returns of the Greeks from Troy in Book 1 of the *Odyssey*, the suitors seem to enjoy the story, and Telemachus and his strange guest Athena/Mentes are at least able to ignore it, but Penelope hearing this song in her bedroom comes down to ask the bard to find another theme since this song is not amusement for her but rather a painful reminder of her lost and wandering husband. Telemachus, however, as the surrogate master of the house, sets his mother straight on the practices of oral poets:

My mother, why do you begrudge the excellent singer the giving of delight in whatever way his mind stirs him? Singers are not to blame, but Zeus is responsible who gives what he wishes to toiling men—each of us. For this singer there is no censure when he sings the evil fate of the Greeks; men most applaud the newest song which falls upon their ears. Let your heart and spirit endure hearing.

(*Odyssey* 1.346-53)

In other words, professional singers should be free to find the story which will allow them to sing most spiritedly and to offer the best entertainment to their audiences; Telemachus acknowledges that a professional singer must sing a narrative which will earn him the greatest applause. Stories which touch a sensitive nerve in a member of the audience and cause grief are really his or her individual problem, since the singer should be free to choose any story in his repertoire. The test of a good singer in this setting is his skillful telling of a tale.

A small amount of reflection, however, will make it immediately clear that these two professional bards are not the only storytellers in the Homeric poems. A variety of characters within the poems tell stories: some of these tales are true and some consciously false; some are presented as fact and some as fiction; some are intended to entertain, and some to give information requested by or needed by another character. There are different types of tales, different types of storytellers, and different types of audiences. Storytellers range from the formal professional paid court singers to the more cracker-barrel type yarn spinners who sing to pass the long, cold nights. As storytellers vary so do their audiences and the situations of both. Yet there is a series of common features in each of the tales which suggests preconceptions of what oral verse-making and tale-telling involve. Even if Homer nowhere in his poems presents a detailed picture of these preconceptions, it is my purpose in this discussion to develop the outline of a Homeric tale-teller and then to fill in the coloration to make a fuller, yet accurate, portrait against which a modern critic can judge the performance of the individual singers in the Homeric poems.

In creating this portrait I will use as equivalents several words which have acquired sharply different connotations in contemporary analytical scholarship, but which I feel can be used interchangeably in this discussion cause they are equated in Homer's poems. Tale-tellers in Homer do tell their stories in meter, they are singers (often accompanied by the lyre), and they neither write nor work from notes; therefore storytellers are presented as oral poets or singers. Homer's storytellers can expand or contract their tales to suit their audiences or themes; thus storytellers in the Homeric poems are presented as improvisers rather than reciters of memorized texts. Therefore I will equate the terms storyteller, oral poet, singer, and improviser in describing the poets presented by Homer; but, of course, I acknowledge that none of these terms need define Homer himself.²

Given the variety of elements which comprise Homer's portrait of the oral poet, it is best to begin by identifying the varieties of tales told in the *Odyssey*. There are at least four types of narratives: (1) stories for entertainment; (2) stories which offer information; (3) stories intended to mislead; and (4) stories intended to educate.

The easiest stories to identify are those narrative tales which are told purely for entertainment with no serious purpose or instructional aim at all. Phemius in Book 1 tells the suitors about the returns of the Greeks. Inasmuch as the suitors were not themselves involved in the Trojan War nor do they ever allude to lost relatives whose fate remains uncertain, these songs are little more than irrelevant, innocent accompaniment for their dinner.³ Similarly Demodocus entertains the Phaeacians with tales about the quarrel of Odysseus and Achilles, the affair of Ares and Aphrodite, and the Wooden Horse. For these men—both the poets and their audiences—and for these occasions, oral narrative song is expected to be solely entertainment.

The significant factors in defining such stories are the intention of the teller, the nature of the occasion, and the quality of the audience for whom the songs are sung. The suitors, occupying Odysseus' palace for at least the tenth year, have little to do; their only real problem is to devise new ways to endure a never-ending series of boringly similar days spent in each other's somewhat questionable company. Think how the suitors fill

² There are distinctions among storytellers: Demodocus was taught by the Muses (8.62-4), while Phemius was self-taught and inspired by a god (22.347 f.); they sing traditional subjects, while Odysseus draws on his own experiences in telling his adventures in Books 9-12.

³ Actually the stories of the returns might have great relevance to them—at least one of those returns; however, the suitors have so objectivized the singer and the song that they can find only entertainment in the performance.

their time: they eat, they talk, they throw dice, they sing, and they engage their minds—such as they are—in plotting petty intrigues, all of which miscarry. Similarly the Phaeacians have few pressures in their blissful kingdom and seek only diversion. Their king Alcinous explains their characteristic pursuits to his guest Odysseus, urging him to remember their excellence and

the things which Zeus has made our activities even from the days of our fathers. For we are not blameless boxers nor wrestlers, but we do run swiftly and are the best in sailing; always is feasting dear to us and music and dancing and changes of clothes, warm baths and beds. But come now, you who are the best dancers of the Phaeacians, begin the dance so that the stranger may tell his friends at home how much we excel the others in sailing and running and dancing and song.

(Odyssey 8.244-53)

For men who have aims or goals no higher than the suitors or the Phaeacians, narrative tales can be merely entertainment because there is no incident in their daily lives which is anything other than entertainment. Innocent tales become good passers of time.

But for the banquet songs of Phemius and Demodocus there is, in fact, another type of audience, listeners who are each in a far different situation but unrecognized by the bards: Penelope and Odysseus. Penelope does not find random tales of those Greeks who have already come back to their homes either irrelevant or innocent. Odysseus hears the tale of his own exploits at Troy following the entrance into the city of the wooden horse and he begins to weep. As Homer reports it, Odysseus' tears

were unnoticed by all the others but Alcinous alone observed him and understood since he was sitting nearby and heard him groaning heavily. Immediately he spoke among the Phaeacians, the lovers of the oar: "Hear me, leaders and counsellors of the Phaeacians—let Demodocus now stay the clear sounding lyre, for by no means is he giving pleasure to all with his song."

(Odyssey 8.532-38)

Both unrecognized listeners provide a test for my thesis. In both passages the situation calls for entertainment; a tale causing grief would be inappropriate to the situation and thus unprofessional for the bards. The professional singers are unaware of the few individuals in their audiences whose reception of the tale is conditioned by their special situation, and even though the singers commit no willful breach of their code, the same song is received differently by different listeners. Thus the reception of these two songs identifies neatly two of the three elements, namely audience and situation, which in differing mixes can create a highly varied series of songs.

As another test of this thesis, let me cite several occasions when the telling of narrative adventures is much more serious since the occasion and the audience have shifted. Anyone can understand the need for a highly convincing story when a girl's mother finds that her daughter's boyfriend is wearing clothes which she recognizes as clothes from her own household. In Phaeacia Queen Arete is suspicious when she first sees Odysseus and asks a dangerous question:

Among them the white-armed Arete began speaking, for she recognized the mantle and the cloak, the beautiful garments which she herself had made along with her servant women. And addressing him she spoke winged words: "Stranger, first I myself have a question for you: who are you and from where do you come? Who gave you these clothes? Did you not say that you came here wandering over the sea?"

(Odyssey 7.233-39)

Odysseus tactfully tells her the true story of his journey to Phaeacia stressing his helplessness, which has now been alleviated by the kindness and understanding of her daughter, Nausicaa. The convincing power of this story serves to gain him hospitality from the Phaeacians. When Telemachus has journeyed to Pylos escaping the suitors and asks Nestor for information about his father, he does not want a pretty story; the old warrior responds by telling him the factual story of his own return and the returns of others. He concludes his tale with the story of Agamemnon's death and Orestes' revenge and then lectures Telemachus on learning from the instructive model of Orestes. The presentation of clear facts is important to Nestor as the teller, and he also seeks to provide a parallel instructive example to encourage the young man to proper action. There are other primarily informative narratives like this. In Sparta after Telemachus asks for a true story, Menelaus tells him the long tale of his return focusing on the story of Proteus, the old man of the sea. This story is not told to entertain, but rather to support the reliability of his information. The story is too long and thus serves to characterize the slightly inept Menelaus, who at this point promises Telemachus three horses and a chariot. Telemachus refuses, assuring Menelaus that he enjoys his tale but asking him to keep the horses because he comes from one of the smallest and rockiest of the famed Greek isles which has no space to pasture horses or to raise feed. But the long story with all its information has demonstrated Menelaus' possession of enough true information that he is worthy of belief in his report about Odysseus on the island of Kalypso. Later Telemachus tells Penelope the true facts of his journey to Pylos and Sparta. In all these examples each listener has a strong reason from his or her situation to ask for a true account, making pleasure or entertainment at best a secondary goal, and each of the tale-tellers realizes how serious the

question is and responds with as much attention to the trustworthiness of the story as possible. Each of these speakers is careful to state that he is telling the truth (*Odyssey* 3.254, 4.349f., 7.297, and 17.108). It is, however, the occasion and the identity of the hearer which determine the aim of the storyteller.

These are two different types of storytelling: stories primarily for entertainment and stories to tell true facts. Both are easy to identify—and if there were further epics discovered, it would be no problem to identify other examples of such stories on the basis of these three variables: the intent of the teller, the willingness or receptivity of the audience, and the situation surrounding both. With the discovery of these variables and the demonstration that even a small shift in any one of them—for example, in the identity of the hearer—can radically affect the nature of the narrative told, there is a gain in discovering the outlines of the portrait of the artist which Homer has painted. But such subtle shifts produce only an outline; it is now time to apply colors and develop the shading which will bring such a poet into a more lively existence.

My method for understanding more fully the nature of the storyteller in the Homeric poems requires the introduction of a major change in one of those variables, and then the observation of the resulting responses in the others. From the evidence available in the *Odyssey*, the most obvious variable in which one can introduce a major change is the situation. There are six examples of stories which are earnestly intended to sound true—to sound as though they are the second type of story I have talked about, but are known to the teller to be lies as he speaks them. In a sense this is the storyteller's art raised to its fullest potential: making the false or fictional seem unquestionably true.⁴ For this type of tale-telling Odysseus is Homer's master storyteller. He is the only teller of the six consciously false tales told in the *Odyssey*: Odysseus to Athena (Book 13), Odysseus to Eumaeus, the swineherd (twice in Book 14), Odysseus to Antinoos, the ringleader of the suitors (Book 17), and Odysseus to Penelope (Book 19). In each case the situation dominates all other concerns, because the teller will be exposed to danger if his identity is known and it is discovered that the story is fictional. There is also the false story of Odysseus to his father Laertes (Book 24), which is a special version of the disguise motif with its peculiar motivation.

In Book 13 the sleeping Odysseus is deposited on Ithaca along with his presents from Alcinoos as the Phaeacians sail back home, leaving him alone on the beach. When he wakes, he does not recognize his own native

⁴ As Homer admits of Odysseus at 19.203. Although this line resembles Hes. *Theogony* 27, I feel that Thalmann (1984:172) is correct to see both as expressions of a traditional conception of the singer's art as opposed to Alcinoos' description at 11.364-66. Cf. West (1971) on line 27.

island because the goddess Athena has shed a mist over his eyes. When she—the goddess herself—comes to greet him disguised as a shepherd, the thoughts of Odysseus are filled with fear for himself and suspicion of danger:

Ah me, who are the men into whose land I have come now? Are they arrogant and wild and unjust, or lovers of men and are their minds godly? Where shall I take these many goods? Where shall I myself go? . . . Now I do not know where to hide them, yet I will not leave them here to become the spoil for others.

(Odyssey 13.200-4, 207-8)

He is alone, on the defensive, and needs information from a trustworthy source. Thus in his presentation to the first person he meets, the unknown young shepherd who is in reality Athena, Odysseus casts himself into a role which will serve his needs: he plays a noble man who has suffered a misfortune and is not only in need of aid but deserving of it.

In addition, this episode on the beach serves as the introduction to the second half of the *Odyssey*. Immediately after Odysseus' false tale Athena breaks through her disguise, compliments Odysseus on his cleverness in designing stories, helps him to conceal his goods in a cave, and begins to plan the destruction of the suitors with him. As the culminating step of this plan, she shrivels him and dulls his eyes, clothes him in rags, and transforms him into an old beggar. This change of costume, however, is merely the physical realization of the disguise which will be dependent upon Odysseus' storytelling ability for its success, an ability which Athena has already tested by meeting him in her threatening disguise as the unknown shepherd and asking him to identify himself. In other words, there is an external form to the disguise which Odysseus wears in the last half of the epic—and, to be sure, on occasions this external disguise can be removed by Athena and can even be seen through. Yet the internal discipline continually demanded to sustain the disguise, a discipline which is rooted in the will and the wiliness of Odysseus, is more important. This internal disguise can be removed by Odysseus himself whenever he desires but must be maintained even under the closest scrutiny and must never be penetrated if his presence is to be kept secret until he chooses the right moment. It is significant that at the beginning of Book 22 Odysseus reveals himself to the suitors by dropping the pretense of being the old beggar and by announcing that he has returned; but at this long-awaited pivotal moment the external costume is so subordinated to the inner-disguise that it is never specifically removed.

This tale in Book 13 adds complexities to the three variables, complexities which are also found in the other false tales:

1. The teller must consciously fashion a false tale which will be perceived as true, presenting him as a character he is not;
2. To the hearer the tale-teller must seem utterly truthful and believable as the assumed character;
3. The situation is constantly perceived by the teller as threatening while it must be seen by the hearer as an incident in one's normal, everyday life—and the story and the character it creates must serve both perceptions.

To put it simply, Odysseus' false tales in the second half of the *Odyssey*, when he has returned to Ithaca, are told in a dangerous situation, and the various hearers, whether they know it or not, are deeply involved in the success or failure of the narrator.

That is the first element of background for these consciously false tales: the dominating importance of the situation for teller and audience. The second is the series of elements from which the stories are composed. The longest of these lying tales is Odysseus' story to Eumaeus, the loyal swineherd, in Book 14. In this narrative it is possible to identify forty-eight narrative elements (i.e., objects, actions, standard phrases, and vignettes), which are joined to form the whole tale.⁵ Odysseus begins with these lines:

Now I claim to be from broad Crete, the son of a rich man. (= home and status by birth)

(*Odyssey* 14.199 f.)

After telling about his illegitimate birth he continues:

(My father) at that time was honored among the Cretans in the land as a god for his good fortune and his wealth and his glorious sons. (= his position as the [bastard] son of a rich and noble man)

(*Odyssey* 14.205 f.)

Compare the beginning of the false story told to Athena on the beach in Book 13:

I learned about Ithaca even in broad Crete far away over the sea. And now I have myself come with these many possessions—yet leaving just as many at home for my children I have fled . . . (= his home and his position as a rich man)

(*Odyssey* 13.256-59)

⁵ See the full list in the Appendix.

In Book 19 when Penelope asks the old beggar who he is, he uses a much expanded form of the same two elements, but he is really only saying that he is from Crete, a rich son of a noble father whose ancestor once conversed with the gods:

There is a certain land, Crete, in the middle of the wine-dark sea, a beautiful and rich land surrounded with water. In it are many men, innumerable, and ninety cities. Language is mixed with language. There are Achaeans, great-hearted Eteocretans, Cydonians, Dorians divided into three tribes, and noble Pelasgians. Among the cities is Cnossos, a great city where Minos was king for nine-year periods and conversed with great Zeus. He was the father of my father . . .

(*Odyssey* 19.172-80)

This passage is longer and more descriptive—and not helpful to historians who would like to use these details to structure an accurate picture of Crete, especially in the reference to the Dorians who are mentioned only here in the Homeric poems. Some critics would regard these unique lines as added to the earlier text of the *Odyssey*; if they were excluded from the passage in Book 19, a neater and tauter description would result:

In it are many men, innumerable, and ninety cities. Among the cities is Cnossos, a great city . . .

The catalog, then, is detail which does not seem to fit well with the phrasing of parallel passages in the other false stories and which can be removed to leave a seamless whole. Probably somebody did add this section of descriptive detail, but in all probability that someone was the singer Odysseus, who desiring to extend his story at this point acts as an oral poet in adding customary information about his subject. Later I will discuss why Homer has Odysseus extend this part of his story, but for the moment notice that the technique is based on the complementary processes of expansion and compression of elements which are typical in Homeric poetry. In addition, beginning a tale by identifying your home is common, as can be seen by comparing other characters who tell their own stories: in Book 15 Eumaeus begins to tell Odysseus who he is by describing his home, the island of Syrie (*Od.* 15.403-14); the woman in his story introduces herself to a friendly Phoenician by saying: “I claim to be from bronze-rich Sidon . . .” (*Od.* 15.425); and Odysseus begins his lying tale to his father with these words: “I am from Alybas where I lived in a glorious house” (*Od.* 24.304; cf. also 9.19-36).

Such repetition of components is common to oral poets, yet it is so simply expressed and straightforward that a poet improvising to satisfy the demands of the moment or the situation could easily seek variation

throughout each story. There were many such items and larger story elements which could be adapted and arranged in different ways to make a tale which seemed fresh and apt in its setting. Here is a list of components in a section of the story to Eumaeus in Book 14 (these are items 34-46 in the analysis in the Appendix):

1. A man is taken on board a ship to be sold into slavery (= the Shanghai story)
2. There is a storm and the ship is destroyed⁶
3. Zeus gives the man aid and saves him
4. He clings to a floating ship timber and is washed ashore (the Robinson Crusoe / Swiss Family Robinson story)
5. He is given a friendly reception when found on the beach
6. The king of the new country sends him on a ship to his home
7. The crew of the ship is treacherous and takes him as their prisoner
8. They tie him up on the ship when they pull into shore
9. He escapes with the gods' aid and is saved

This is the tale of a rough-and-tumble adventurer who is telling his story to show that he is an able and experienced man of the world—a man to be watched by an enemy, but appreciative of good treatment and a staunch friend to a good host.

Variation of these very elements in Odysseus' false tale to Athena in Book 13 produces a different story (the numbers in the text indicate the elements from the above list):

(The narrator has killed a man and)

(1) I went immediately to the ship and pleaded with the lordly Phoenicians, and I gave them spoil which satisfied their hearts. I asked them to put me on board and to take me to Pylos or to shining Elis, where the Epeians rule; (2) but the force of the wind drove them from there much against their will, and they did not wish to deceive me. (3/4) Driven from that course we arrived here in the night, and eagerly rowed into the harbor; and we had no thought of food much though we craved it, but going off the ship we all lay down. (7/8) Then sweet sleep came over me in my exhaustion; taking my goods from the hollow ship they set them where I was lying on the sand. (9) Embarking they departed for well-settled Sidon.

(*Odyssey* 13.272-86)

The story is completely changed in quality and tone even though the elements identified in Book 14 remain the same:

⁶ This section reveals its traditional quality, since 14.301-9 are repeated at 12.403-6 and 415-9.

1. *The Shanghai story*. In Book 13 a man is taken aboard a ship and buys his passage (the difference is that the fare is paid willingly in advance rather than being collected when he is sold as a slave), but the point has been made that the man in this story is rich and thus able to avoid a threat of slavery through his influence or his strength.

2. *The storm destroys the ship*. In Book 13 the storm is not that strong, though it prevents the ship from proceeding on its course and forces the sailors to seek harbor on Ithaca. The rich stranger has arrived on Ithaca with lots of goods and thus cannot say that his ship was destroyed; he characterizes himself as an honored passenger on a ship run by respectful Phoenicians who for some reason have cared for him and his possessions. In both stories the storm is involved in creating an unexpected landfall, an opening for a new event.

3/4. *Zeus aids the man and saves him / he is carried on a floating ship beam to shore*. These are extreme expedients which are not needed in Book 13 because the Phoenicians are willing to care for the man: they pulled hard on those oars to get to shore, so hard that they were all exhausted and lay down on the beach. He has become a friend and colleague to the crew.

5/6. *He is given a friendly reception on the beach*. This is what is happening as he is telling the story to a very welcoming stranger and thus this element cannot directly be part of the story. In addition, he is told that he is already home so there is no need to send him home—and, after all, he is the king in this land.

7/8. *The crew takes him as a prisoner and ties him up on the ship when they go ashore*. In Book 13 sleep incapacitates him leaving him at the mercy of the crew, but since they were portrayed as respectful of him, they unload his goods and leave them.

9. *By the gods' aid he escapes and is saved*. Here he is saved by men's good will but now needs help and asks the Ithacan stranger; he is not in sufficiently desperate straits to need the gods' help, even though in fact he is being aided by Athena.

These stories are very different in their details even though both are structured on the basis of the same series of components. Note the difference in the situations. In Book 14 the hero and swashbuckling adventurer tells of his life of action and adventure; in Book 13 the stranger is asking for help and protection in his moment of need. He is alone on a strange island which has been revealed to be his home; yet the previous news of home has not been good and he must protect himself until he finds his bearings and learns how dangerous the situation really is. Therefore certain elements are omitted from his story—or, more accurately, deleted

from the archetypal story. He does not want to appear as destitute as the adventurer in the story in Book 14; therefore, there can be no devastating storm which destroys the ship, no lucky escape from the sea, no hostile crew which feels safe in shanghaiing him, and no trap from which he must escape. Third, he lives through none of the rugged and risky perils of the adventure story in Book 14; rather he portrays himself as the independent, righteous killer of the prince who tried to rob him of his wealth—but stealthily, at night, from a secret ambush. He was thus required to leave wife and children to seek a life on his own; he is not a man of daring, but rather an unlucky banker.⁷

Some elements which are in both stories have been modified or even reversed. The fictional hero goes aboard a ship but is not shanghaiing as a potential slave; rather he buys his own ticket. In both stories the crew gets money; in the first as a kind of pirate, cut-throat group, but in the second as travel agents. He arrives at a strange destination because of a strong storm; in Book 14 the storm is strong enough to destroy the ship and all hands, thus appropriate to the chancy world in which the adventurer lives; in Book 13, because the winds are too strong, the sailors are forced to pass by their destination and make for the next good harbor. Then this crew finds him asleep and can do with him what they will, but they resist; they free him and his goods and sail off. In Book 14 there are two kidnap attempts in which the adventurer escapes with the aid of a god to triumph over the forces of evil; in Book 13, a tired man at the end of his trip is unloaded by porters and allowed to catch up on his sleep.

It may look as though I am describing two versions of the same story with the components given different values in order to make each tale fit its situation, but that is probably too simple an explanation since it ignores the omitted items. There are common elements in the Shanghai story and the Robinson Crusoe / Swiss Family Robinson story; but these do not become a part of any one single story until the poet borrows them and organizes them into the tale which he is telling at the particular moment in accordance with a plan. I am going to call this plan the “narrative conception”—or to borrow a term from current literary theory, the “matrix” for that particular story.⁸ The assumption of this type of

⁷ Yet there is the warning in lines 13.258-70.

⁸ I use here a word discussed by Michael Riffaterre (1978:19): “The poem results from the transformation of the matrix, a minimal and literal sentence, into a longer, complex, and nonliteral periphrasis. The *matrix* is hypothetical, being only the grammatical and lexical actualization of a structure. The matrix may be epitomized in one word, in which case the word will not appear in the text. It is always actualized in successive variants; the form of these variants is governed by the first or primary actualization, the *model*. Matrix, model,

variation is strengthened when selected elements recur in the other false stories with different emphasis and order, consequently conveying a different tone and significance:

1. In book 17 where Odysseus is trying to goad the angry Antinoos into rash action, he plays the cheeky braggart who was once rich and strong and has now come on hard times; he tells how he led his men to Egypt and lost the war there through their rashness. This Egyptian expedition fits the persona being created by Odysseus in Book 17, it suits his situation, and it is a verbal representation of the underlying matrix. It is also repeated word for word from the longest version of the story in Book 14, the adventurer's story,⁹ and, of course, it does not suit the righteous banker of Book 13 and is omitted there.

2. In Book 19 the fictitious Aithon meets Penelope by the fire alone at night to tell her news of Odysseus which he has picked up on his travels. He says that he saw Odysseus who came to Crete, but when Odysseus was delayed in sailing, Aithon was able to be his host for twelve days. The vignette about Odysseus being about to sail but then being delayed occurs also in the story of the adventurer in Book 14, but there Odysseus while visiting the Thesprotians had gone off to the oracle at Dodona seeking Zeus' aid in plotting his return to Ithaca. To Eumaeus in Book 14 Odysseus tells the story which shows him appreciating the real Odysseus as an active man willing to deal with the danger from the suitors because he knows that this persona will most easily gain him the friendship and alliance of Eumaeus—and Odysseus in disguise has great need of friends. To Penelope he tells a gentle story which is encouraging about Odysseus, using the delayed-voyage incident to show the successful trip of Odysseus to Troy many years ago and the warmth of his reception along the way. Both tales use the same elements, but each alters the motivation in radical ways. Analytic critics have suggested that one or the other of these elements is the original, and a later copier or reworker of the original poem then shortened or extended the basic story to imitate the real Homer. But, in fact, Odysseus is only acting like an oral singer when he repeatedly uses similar elements allowing each to be lengthened or shortened, altered, adapted, omitted, given various motives or causes, and organized in a different order.¹⁰ He tells a story which probably was never told in that way before, but which is at the same time familiar because the elements of

and text are variants of the same structure.”

⁹ 14.258-72 = 17.427-41 with small adaptations.

¹⁰ On this whole point, see the discussion by Redfield (1967).

the story are as well-known as nursery rhymes and folk-tales to the Greeks who were raised from the cradle with stories built from these same elements.

The most convincing proof of this statement lies in the realization that the same components can be repeated word for word in passages like the battle in Egypt. Or they can be stated in phrases which are different even though the vignette is identical in each detail; for example, the form used to convey the idea that the singer comes from Crete and from the house of a rich man is varied on each occurrence. Or they can be stated in terms that are different because the item is being given a different meaning or even being treated in two opposite fashions, like the story of the sailors who take a man on board for money, some as pirates (the Shanghai story) and some as travel agents. Each story element seems to have its own life independent of the traditional diction in which the Homeric poems were composed.

So far, then, there are five prominent features in Homer's portrait of the oral storyteller:

1. At the very least he sings to entertain.
2. He can tell facts and convey correct information.
3. The variables which in different mixtures cause the poet to modify his story in its details and even its intent are: the identity of the narrator, the nature of the audience, and the pressures from the situation.
4. The method of composing tales is that of variation on the basis of standard and repeated elements and larger story components, expanding and compressing versions to suit the needs of the moment.
5. Beneath each story there is what I have called a plan, a narrative conception, an organizing theme, or a matrix which explains how the story in its details and development suits the singer, the hearer, and the narrative situation.

II. The Master Singer of Homer's *Odyssey*

Now it is time to enhance this portrait of the poet to its fullest by expanding the breadth and depth of the matrix and demonstrating its potential for subtlety in the simultaneous layering of different matrices within one story. The narrative which is most apt for such analysis is that famous series of adventures told by Homer's master storyteller Odysseus to the Phaeacians, his trip to fantasyland in Books 9-12. Homer introduces

these tales with an idealized image of an oral poetic performance presented by his hero:

King Alcinous, renowned above all men, surely this is a fine thing, to hear a singer such as this man is—like the gods in his voice. I say that there is no more gratifying satisfaction than when festivity occupies all the people, banqueters sitting in order throughout the halls listen to the singer, the tables nearby are filled with bread and meat, and the steward drawing wine from the bowl carries it and pours it into cups. I think that this is the finest occasion. But your heart is bent on asking of my mournful sorrows so that in my suffering I may yet groan more.

(Odyssey 9.2-13)

The company is festive, the food is excellent and plentiful, the cup is never emptied of wine, and the singer provides suitable accompaniment to the feast. But Odysseus feels himself to be the contrasting type of singer even though he sits in the midst of one of the most bountiful and freely-giving societies in his past twenty years of experience.

The problem for Odysseus in Alcinous' court is that he is the unwilling singer of his own adventures. Thus he is unlike a professional court poet in at least three of the previously listed five ways: (1) others have some idea of entertaining; Odysseus is trying to explain who he is to hosts who have been very kind and deserve a full and truthful answer; (2) other poets can tell facts and convey correct information; that is the presumption of Odysseus' adventures too, but Homer will have him sketch for his listeners an imaginary, spiritual landscape peopled with fantasy figures in the hope of conveying the truth about the nature of the world he has personally come to know. It is a paradox that those tales which seem to be the most realistic—namely the lying tales of Odysseus in the second half of the poem—are, in fact, utterly false; those which seem the most fantastic, filled with monsters and magic, are, in fact, the most truthful; and (3) other poets are professionals who perform before audiences which have little personal stake in the story sung. The only pressure from the situation which falls upon the tale-teller is the creation of a well-sung story. Odysseus, however, knows and respects his audience. He wants to explain to them who he is by telling his own story, a tale in which he cannot remain objective. Since he wants them to understand why he is not able to stay with them in spite of their most generous offers, including the offer of the princess in marriage, he is pressed to produce a higher literature by that powerful combination of elements, the extraordinary status of the narrator, the aptness and willingness of the audience, and the special demands of the situation. As the Phaeacians have been perfect hosts, he wants to be the perfect guest. In other words, Homer will have to provide a matrix shaping the story told by his hero which will allow Odysseus to present himself as a man who lives in a world different from Phaeacia, but

who can respect and admire the society which the Phaeacians have created.

Odysseus in telling his adventures is like other narrators in that he does compose his tales using standard and repeated motifs, expanding and compressing variant versions to suit his point. Further, there does seem to be a series of matrices so layered that each adventure has its own individual matrix and at the same time the series as a whole is built on a unified narrative conception; thus there is a carefully structured hierarchy of matrices. In addition, not only does Odysseus act like an oral poet and tale-teller in his techniques of composition, but Homer also continually calls our attention to Odysseus' own awareness of his position as a singer among his other roles in these four famed books of adventures.¹¹ For example, in the so-called Intermezzo in the middle of Book 11, Homer has Odysseus stop his song for an understandable reason—he is tired: “It is now the time to sleep either going with my companions to the swift ship or here; my journey home will be the concern of you and the gods” (11.330-32; cf. 8.87 -92). The audience, however, is unwilling for such a pause: “So he spoke, and all were hushed in silence and held enchanted throughout the shadowy hall” (333 f.). The Queen honors him as man and singer in these words: “Phaeacians, how does this man appear to you in beauty and stature and the well-balanced mind within him” (336 f.). These last words “the well-balanced mind within him” in Greek are *phrenas endon eĩsas* which are also found as a description of Penelope and Telemachus in the days before the arrival of the suitors (14.178 [Telemachus] and 18.249 [Penelope]). And Alcinous echoes her words:

Odysseus, as we look on you, we in no way think you to be a cheat or thief such as many of the men scattered far and wide which the black earth nourishes, men who invent lies from things which no one could ever see. You possess a grace in your words, an excellent sense, and with understanding, like a singer, do you tell your story, your own dismal sorrows and those of all the Argives.

(*Odyssey* 11.363-69)

The king lauds him for *morphê epeôn*, *phrenes esthlai*, and telling his story *epistamenôs* (“the grace in his word,” “excellent sense,” and “with understanding”; these words are used elsewhere to describe those who think and speak well or are adept craftsmen and artists).¹² Clearly there is high praise for the song of this singer. The audience response is that offered to the finest of singers, and he is described as thoughtful, wise, and intelligent—an apt husband for Penelope and father to Telemachus. There

¹¹ E.g., 9.228, 9.299-305, 12.153, and 12.223-35. See the full discussion by Suerbaum (1968).

¹² *Od.* 8.179, 7.111, 1.117, and *Il.* 17.470; and *passim* for *epistamenôs*.

is something to learn from this storyteller. Ten books later on Ithaca when Odysseus finally gets his chance to string the bow in the contest with the suitors, Homer describes the event with a simile:

So the suitors spoke, but when resourceful Odysseus had gripped the great bow and examined it, just as when a man experienced in the lyre and song easily stretches a string around a new peg, fixing the twisted sheep's gut on both ends, so now Odysseus strung the great bow without effort. Then taking it in his right hand he tested the string. It sang sweetly like the tune of a swallow.

(Odyssey 21.404-11)

The culminating act of his return is the reestablishment of his identity before the suitors by gaining revenge on those who have wronged him, a cleansing action begun when he strings the old king's weapon of war. The similar act at the end of the first half of the *Odyssey* is the reestablishment of his identity before others by telling his story. When Homer uses the simile of the master singer to describe Odysseus stringing his other instrument, the bow, the craftsmanship of the singer and the just warrior are united in one hero. The man who can take just vengeance is the man who can artfully explain his identity to others and justify his conduct of his own life. The bard is the warrior, and the warrior is the bard. Thus it seems to be Homer's plan that his Odysseus be included with the other storytellers in the *Odyssey* and be rated as one of the most competent bards in the poem (cf. 17.517-21).

Consequently, Odysseus' famed tales of his own return are marked in clear ways by Homer as a series of stories which are the best in his repertoire—the tales of Homer's master storyteller. Fittingly, the stories in Books 9-12 are the most complex in the relationship between tale-teller and audience. In these stories the teller still gives an accurate report, but because of the situation of the listener and the teller the story also contains a higher truth which is more fully realized in the growth of the hero and in the development of the larger poem. Odysseus after leaving Troy visits in order the land of the Cicones, the land of the Lotus-Eaters, the island of the Cyclops, the kingdom of Aeolus, the land of the Laestrygonians, the island of Circe; then he journeys to the Underworld, and finally he passes the threats of the Sirens, Scylla and Charybdis, and the island grazed by the cattle of the Sun.

Since there has clearly been such effort in building Odysseus' characterization as an intelligent and capable singer, what are the elements for which a critic must account in describing the matrix forming and shaping the individual adventures and the whole series of tales? There are some simple guidelines. First, his tale is a series of adventures: the hero moves from one landfall to another, continually affirming his intention to return to Ithaca. The order of his adventures seems determined far more

by chance occurrences—storms, randomly selected courses, following out a direction to see where it leads—than a directed course in which each adventure leads to the next one in a deeply causal way.¹³ Second, in regard to the length of each tale there is little importance whether the sailors stay for a short or a long time. They seem to stay a relatively short time with the Cyclops even though the story is long in its telling; they stay quite a long time with Circe, but the tale requires about the same number of lines as the tale of the Cyclops.¹⁴ Third, the stories in both Books 9 and 10 are organized as two short tales followed by a long one: thus the adventures with the Cicones and the Lotus-Eaters are short and followed by the developed Cyclops story just as the short stories about Aeolus and the Laestrygonians are followed by the longer adventure with Circe. Since the length of the tale does not relate to the length of time spent in each place, it must relate to the importance which the storyteller attaches to the tale in the thematic development of his narrative.

One important principle for interpretation results from these observations: these stories do not reflect history or the historical perspective in their order, their time span, or their subject matter. In these tales Odysseus creates a fictional landscape inhabited by fantastic beings; the fact that these places are visited is more important than the reason each is visited in a set order. The time spent in telling the longer adventures of the Cyclops, Circe, and the Underworld is the storyteller's sign to look more carefully, more analytically at those adventures; there is, therefore, need for interpretation of each element in these stories if we are going to catch the storyteller's point. That point is clearly defined by the question which Homer has Alcinous ask at the beginning of the stories—indeed, it is the question which motivates Odysseus to tell his adventures: Stranger, who are you? These tales should allow Odysseus to explain to the Phaeacians and to Homer's audience who he is.

The interpretive method which seems to best suit these adventures is to ask why Homer includes each of them in providing a full explanation of who Odysseus is. Homer feels that each tale is formative and educational; in some significant way they have made him what he is and will be in the second half of the *Odyssey*. Therefore, to determine the broad educational view of these adventures one must seek to identify the essential learning experience at each stop; each tale is different in form and detail, but each is based on an individual matrix so that there is a traceable development in the whole narrative. In Books 9 and 10, Odysseus tells of three different modes of living and their effects on men: in the Land of the Lotus-Eaters,

¹³ Though Scully (1971) shows that Odysseus exercises more personal control over the route after his adventures in the underworld.

¹⁴ Also, they stay a month with Aeolus, although this is one of the shorter tales (10.14).

the Island of the Cyclops, and the land of the Laestrygonians. There are also three other adventures in which Odysseus learns more about his own responses and those of his men, responses to a new and generally permissive atmosphere compared with the ten years at Troy: in the battle with the Cicones, on their voyage under aid from Aeolus, and on Circe's island. Book 11 with its vision of the Underworld provides a glimpse of a land where Odysseus, while alive, should never be and could never stay but which does show him what death is: what has become of the famous old heroes of the past and what will become of him. Book 12 presents a series of challenges, all of which Odysseus personally manages to withstand even though there is loss: the challenge of sailing by the island of the Sirens, the risk of either Scylla or Charybdis, and the resistance needed to comply with the stern strictures of Helios in regard to his sacred cattle. I would organize these adventures into three neatly book-bound topics: Books 9 and 10 explore the potential for humans to live cooperatively in a society with trust in one another; Book 11 presents the quality of existence after life; Book 12 illustrates the challenges which the world offers to its inhabitants.

Closer examination will reveal the educative components of the individual adventures. The easiest to identify are the tales describing others' modes of living. The Lotus-Eaters offer forgetfulness, a life of no concern or care but also of no achievement; Odysseus drives his men away knowing that such an unruffled existence allows them no hope. Polyphemus, the one-eyed Cyclops, represents a world completely lacking in communal civilization. Men live separately, each in his own cave. There are no laws, no tribal customs, no meetings, no community farms; here is Homer's description:

The lawless, arrogant Cyclopes . . . who . . . neither plant crops with their hands or with plows but all grows without planting or ploughing, wheat and barley and vines which bear rich grapes, and the rain of Zeus makes them grow. For these men have no councils, nor assemblies, nor laws, but they dwell on the peaks of high mountains in hollow caves, and each one gives the law to his children and his wives, and they care little for each other.

(Odyssey 9.106-15)

It is true that the other Cyclopes did come running to Polyphemus' cave when he was crying out in pain, but the only reason they give for coming is his loud cries which were keeping them awake; the other Cyclopes are interested in doing anything for Polyphemus which will quiet him and allow them to get some sleep. Polyphemus exemplifies the life and code of man alone, and Odysseus happily flees his island. The Laestrygonians are monstrous butchers—but, as opposed to the Cyclopes, a kind of butchers' union. They do live together, do have a king, and do have a place of common meeting, but they destroy any man who comes near and drink his blood.

These three societies are not condemned by Odysseus or by Homer; neither one is a moralist. Rather each society is a possible way for a man to live provided that he will accept the total implications of living on the level of a Cyclops or a Lotus-Eater. But one cannot have both the blissful lack of concern of the Laestrygonians and a pleasant land of high culture, nor is it possible to be a Cyclops and at the same time cherish a high regard for one's fellow humans and their needs. By fleeing these societies, by continuing his quest, Odysseus declares that each mode of living is inadequate for a man who wishes to achieve a productive life in the company of others—that is, to be a Greek.

In these two books Odysseus also discovers something about himself and his crew in addition to the lessons about different human societies. The visit to the Cicones is little more than a pirate raid, leading to a battle with the inhabitants. Odysseus has just left Troy, and in making this raid he has not departed significantly from the basic warrior ethic. He and his men do gain a feast by the shore on the spoils, but there is a painful cost. When they find that six benches are now empty in each ship, they leave the land of the Cicones sorrowing for their lost comrades. It is Odysseus' last pirate raid, as he comes to realize that no prize of war compensates for the loss of his friends.

Of course, even though I have insisted that there is little which is meant to be historical or chronological in the ordering of the adventures, there is an obvious significance in having this piratical raid take place just after the Greeks have left Troy, the site of their monumental pillage. Odysseus' voyage does have a basic direction in that it starts from Troy, an experience of constant death and war for spoils, and ends with his reinstatement in Ithaca with its implications of ordered kingdom, close family, and loyal friends. There is a clear framework of development even though the individual tales do not seem to be closely linked in a cause-and-effect sequence or a chain showing a clearly developing theme.

When Aeolus gives Odysseus the bag of winds, he discovers the weakness of his own crew. Even though Ithaca is in sight, they cannot resist the basic urges of envy and greed; they open the bag, loose the winds, and lose their homecoming. Odysseus, who fell asleep at the crucial moment, almost despairs but learns that he cannot succumb to even so understandable a human frailty as exhaustion if he wants to arrive at his goal. When Aeolus hears of the failure of their return voyage to Ithaca, a voyage which he has virtually given them as a present, he can only say that Odysseus and his men are not yet qualified to undertake the challenges of Ithaca. And, in fact, when Odysseus finally lands on Ithaca, the weaknesses revealed in this incident will be gone, and he will be willing and able to pursue the goal of a civilized kingdom with fewer flaws in himself. While there is no cause-and-effect connection, it is important that the same testing

of will-power is repeated in the incident of the cattle of the Sun, where the results are much better for Odysseus although not for his men. There is enough development through these adventures in the poet's hero that Homer could not have reversed these incidents and retained the sense of the hero's growth as the framework of his story.

Finally, Circe represents a land of magic—potions, magic wands, and charms. Her beauty, her hospitality, and her song are irresistibly seductive to men who—in accepting her gifts—become kept and tamed animals with no further assertions or demands. In other words, Circe exposes to men their own weaknesses. Life with her is pleasant and easy, but there is no encouragement for individual aspiration. If a man shields himself from the lure of Circe's enchantment by being determined and on his guard, then he can be much benefitted. Odysseus does learn from her and retains enough determination that he is not changed into one of her swine and can understand the desires of his men to continue to seek Ithaca. In each of these last three encounters Odysseus learns how easy it is for men to relax, to succumb to basic desires with little recognition of the implicit costs. The warrior code inevitably involves loss, as he learns in the conflict with the Cicones; and the fulfillment of a goal requires stern and strict dedication and a refusal to surrender to desires from within—as he learns in the adventure with the Bag of the Winds, or to temptations from without—as he sees in the transformation of his men on the island of Circe. The six adventures of Books 9 and 10 are based on a broad educational experience. They each teach Odysseus about the ability of men to live together in a cooperative society, either in one of the societies which he visits or in that which he himself must learn to form by trusting in other men.

Book 11 is the first of the great series of underworld books of the Western world; in each of these, *Aeneid* 6 and Dante's *Divine Comedy* prime among others, a character learns a lesson which is beyond the reach of other mortals. To be sure, Odysseus learns few facts in the underworld, yet he does come to understand a consistent view of death which motivates his fellow heroes and is predominant in later religious practice. Odysseus first meets the helpless Elpenor and then tries to embrace his mother, who slips away through his fingers saying:

This is the appointed way for mortals when they die. Sinews no longer hold the flesh and bone together; but the strength of the blazing fire destroys them as soon as the spirit leaves the white bones, and the soul flies away taking wing like a dream.

(*Odyssey* 11.218-22)

A series of ladies, all of whom have a special claim to be famous but who are reduced to insubstantial wisps, demonstrate how complete the

deprivation of death is. Then Odysseus meets the dead heroes Agamemnon, Achilles, and Ajax. While Agamemnon will continue a morose existence knowing that his life ended ingloriously, he is interested in giving hints on how to live better to those who still belong to the upper world, and he is desperately eager for news of his son, who is still alive. Achilles, who has lived the most glorious life of the ancient warriors, is also unhappy in the underworld:

I would wish to be bound to the soil as a servant for another man who had no land of his own nor livelihood than to rule over all the exhausted dead.

(*Odyssey* 11.489-91)

He strides away bursting with pride, however, when he hears that his son continues to live as a brave warrior. Ajax still nurses his grudge from his living days. In the underworld each person is individualized only by his memories of life; there is nothing of interest or challenge in this unearthly existence which stretches on forever. Emotions come only from recollections of days previous or information about living relatives. Death is negation—insubstantial, floating, without aspiration or achievement. Such is the bleak view which a normal mortal has of his inevitable end in Homer's world. Yet there is a positive side: Odysseus through this experience learns the necessity of striving to gain a rewarding life for himself because he realizes that once death comes, all opportunity is gone.

In Book 12 Odysseus explains how rugged he has found the external world to be. He tells of three obstacles, all of which are rigid, stern, and inhumane in their demands. The enchanting Sirens demonstrate the hard and disheartening truth that the world's most alluring and irresistible blandishment is the offer of praise to the soul greedy for flattery; the experience is numbing. As one critic states: "the usual order is death first, renown afterwards" (Vermeule 1979:203). Then Odysseus must choose between the Planctae (the Wandering Rocks which clash together to crush a boat sailing between them) or Scylla and Charybdis, both barriers which cannot be passed without loss. Both are representative of those natural dangers or disasters which so far surpass any man's strength that they will defeat him, and Odysseus does lose six men while he, like a tin soldier, postures helplessly in his armor at the monster Scylla. Finally, the restrictions against harming the cattle of the Sun are applied to all men without regard to circumstances, both to the conscious sinner and to the desperate man who seeks to avoid death by starvation. In these four challenges the world, in which men must strive to establish a meaningful life for themselves, appears hostile and even malignant; its laws are enforced harshly while its dangers are either unavoidable or irresistible.

Books 9 and 10 contain examples of different societies in which men have organized themselves as well as insights into the weaknesses and

shortsightedness of humans in joining together in communal efforts; Book 11 stresses the importance of positive activity during life by presenting the desolate wasteland of death which awaits all mortals; and Book 12 illustrates the uncompromising rigidity of the world in which men must fashion their lives. Odysseus, as teller of these tales, shapes his story for the benefit of his listeners in order to show them the most significant lessons he has drawn from his travels and therefore who he is now. He is devoted to finding a satisfactory life for himself and his friends within a society of men. This mode of living must reward him “here and now” because death is the end of all striving, achievement, and acknowledgment. He describes several types of men who live in various societies, but finding no existence that offers him as rewarding a life as the promise of Ithaca, he leaves those islands. Yet his return has demonstrated how difficult the challenge to him is because the world throws up almost insurmountable barriers even if he has learned to focus intently on a goal of overcoming the innate weaknesses which all men share.

Obviously these are tales of a different nature from the stories of pure entertainment, or those which give true information, or the lying tales, even though they are composed in the same language and employ the same techniques as those tales. First, of course, there is a highly knowledgeable teller who has personally experienced events which court poets know only through the Muses. Secondly, the listeners by their questioning of Odysseus show that they are prepared to hear a story which offers not only information but also entertainment. Third, the situation is changed from that in the more game-oriented atmosphere of Book 8; both teller and audience want informative communication to take place and they are willing to pass up their evening’s sleep to learn the full series of stories. The three variables which are so important in determining the nature of stories in the Homeric poems—teller, audience, and situation—are here adjusted to offer maximum encouragement for a series of remarkable tales. An ignorant singer, a sleepy or bloated audience, and a less attention-riveting, focused moment—any such change in these variables would have produced a narrative of lesser import.

But those are surface variables, or variables external to the story proper. There is one other difference between Odysseus’ adventures in Books 9-12 and other Homeric tales, a difference which is more fundamental. Earlier I discussed the matrix—in other phrasing, the plan or the narrative conception of the teller as he tells his story. A basic definition of a narrative is a series of events told as a sequence, a definition which would apply to each of the narratives told in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as well as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* themselves. In addition, however, each narrative is formed by an individual shaping matrix or controlling idea. Thus even narrations of the same story will vary subtly

among narrators, each of whom attempts to convey his own idea in his own way even though using traditional formulaic language and story patterns. The force of such a matrix is especially clear in the shaping of the repeated sequences in the lying tales, as I have argued earlier. In addition, the epics continually show a more complex, Russian-doll structure, where one narrator tells a story which itself contains a reported story; for example, in Book 9 Homer (narrator 1) describes Odysseus (narrator 2) telling about the lies which he, as the fictional character No-man (narrator 3), told to the Cyclops. As a result the several narratives can be organized into a complex hierarchy of layers, each of which is understood by reference to the particular matrix from which it has been generated. The design of that matrix and the individualized phrasing of the tale are dependent on the external variables: the character of the teller, the nature and response of the audience, and the pressures of the situation. Thus the Cyclops is the desperate No-man's audience in a situation where the weaker victim must depend on his wit to save his life; at the same time, however, Odysseus' listeners are the Phaeacians to whom he is seeking to explain his identity by telling them about his stay with Polyphemus; and simultaneously Homer's hearers are both his fellow Greeks and later generations for whom he narrates the education of his Everyman figure.

Generally the matrix of the individual story can be reduced to a rather simple statement derived from the basic cultural experience of the people and exemplified in mottoes, proverbs, standard bits of gnomic wisdom, common social practices, and so on. The elements of guest-friendship, a societal relationship sufficiently important to be sanctioned by Zeus and invoked often in extended type-scenes throughout the *Odyssey*, are the basis of the narrator's matrix for the adventure in the Cyclops' cave. The formalized guest-friendship custom calls for a rigidly sequential series of events: (1) for the host to be present; (2) for the guest to advance and the host to greet him; (3) for the host to avoid asking the guest's name before welcoming him and extending the right to stay the night (lest there be some unrecognized animosity which would make this arrangement impossible if the name were known first); (4) for an exchange of religious thoughts—something like: "Zeus welcomes all guests and it is our pleasure to share in this custom" (e.g. *Od.* 3.43-50, 4.33-36, 7.161-66, and 14.53-61); (5) for the host to care for the guest's baggage and his horses or ships; (6) for the host to offer a banquet with an opening prayer; (7) for the host to provide some entertainment for his guest; (8) for wine to be offered by the host accompanying good wishes; (9) for the host only now to ask the guest's name and his story; (10) finally, on leaving for a gift to be offered by the host and a prayer for good fortune. This pattern is completed several times quite early in the *Odyssey*, most notably when Athena in the disguise of Mentis visits Telemachus in Ithaca, and when Telemachus visits

Nestor in Pylas and Menelaus in Sparta.¹⁵ At the Cyclops' cave in Book 9, however, all is inverted:¹⁶ (1) there is no host present; (2) when the host appears the guest is horrified and retreats while the host ignores him; (3) Polyphemus immediately asks Odysseus' name; (4) the host then threatens the guest and declares that he has no religious scruples; (5) Polyphemus asks about Odysseus' conveyance but not so that he can care for it but rather so that he can destroy any means of his guest's escape; in any case, Odysseus tells him lies; (6) there is a banquet—the host eats a guest with gusto; (7) in place of entertainment after dinner, the host falls into a deep sleep; (8) the wine comes from the guest who wants to make the host drunk; (9) the guest finally gives the host a false name; (10) the host extends a gift to the guest—he will eat him last; and finally the guest departs to a curse from the host.

Guest-friendship is turned systematically on its head throughout this section of the narrative in Book 9; thus a societal custom informs the matrix not only in structuring the events of the Cyclops story but also in shaping the lies of No-man to his perverse host. Similarly, I would argue that the basic division between man and god lies at the root of the adventures with Circe. Only those thoughtless enough to assume that they can live the limitless life of a god are changed into useless swine; others show more mortal behavior and realize the conditional nature of their daily, impermanent existence. As guest-friendship is a basic societal custom, so also the separation of god from man is the most fundamental element of Greek religion. The same type of culturally imbedded matrix can be shown to be employed by Odysseus in telling each of his other adventures and by Homer in designing the full narrative.

At this broader level the various landfalls during the extended travels of Odysseus represent stages in his learning as he journeys, physically and spiritually, from Troy and the individualistic honor code to Ithaca and the future cooperative society. These stages in their development reveal a narrator's matrix founded on a schematized program of education in the basic forces of human existence. This four-book learning phase is but one part of the larger preparation of the hero who must continually choose to make Ithaca the goal of his voyage; this "education of the hero" is the matrix on which Homer structures the first twelve books of his epic. Of course, the honor code and the hero are both basic themes in early Greek epic and lyric.

I have left until last the most interesting question. Why is the set of Odysseus' adventures told as a flashback which presents events out of

¹⁵ See the full discussion of such scenes by Arend (1933:39-53).

¹⁶ Well explored by Belmont (1962).

chronological order? The years spent with Kalypso, the losing of his raft, and the time with Phaeacians—all occur at the end of his travels even though Homer in Books 5-8 places them prior to Odysseus' adventure stories. This placement is an important element in the matrix which is in the mind of Homer. Odysseus, telling his adventures triumphantly on the day before his return to Ithaca, presents tales in which he shows that he has learned not only *how* one can win against the world but even *why* one should choose Ithaca over the lovely islands of Kalypso and Alcinous: neither of those islands would allow him to win any victories of his own. Kalypso is so preponderant that no man could lead a life of independence in her company and Alcinous' kingdom is so plenteous and his people so generous that there is no challenge or victory when one has made an assertion. It is typical of life in Phaeacia that Odysseus is immediately offered everything, even marriage to Nausicaa, but at the same moment he is offered a trip home so that he can choose with no feeling of compulsion nor any need to win or earn either goal. However, when he asserts himself in an athletic contest, the Phaeacians are instantly overcome by a man who has developed his strength in the outside world of stress and trouble. In choosing not to remain with Kalypso or the Phaeacians, Odysseus enters a world of death, sickness, weakness, and compromise, a flawed world ruled by vindictive divinities—but also a world in which a man of determination and skill can create a life which welcomes challenge and honors achievement. And this is the strange choice which makes the *Odyssey* an epic, a choice worthy of the epic hero who embraces the chance to flee anonymity; it is also a choice which is based on the learning which Odysseus has gained in his travels. When he tells his adventures to the Phaeacians, not only is he trying to demonstrate his understanding of the world to them, but Homer is also justifying Odysseus' astounding decision to leave the pleasant island of Phaeacia and to return to the troubled kingdom of Ithaca. Odysseus teaches his audience in Phaeacia what he has seen, what the qualities and costs of various societies are, and which societies have either repelled him or been rejected by him. But Homer has a much wider audience in mind. The Cyclops is not solely a lonely savage from a distant past; neither he nor the other characters met in the adventures are limited by reality but rather embody all that unlimited range of imaginative and horrifying features available to mythological figures. All men have moments when they would like to live alone with their own possessions, without the continual bother of a neighbor's intrusions, cares, and worries, but if a man lives on that level, he should know that his community will look like him. The Cyclops is not an external being except in Odysseus' story-form; "Cyclopism" is a natural internal reflex which we can come to understand in all its complexity when it is placed in a simpler, mythological story setting. The same is true for the

concentrated brutality of “Laestrygonianism” and the complete apathy of “Lotus-Eaterism.” In fact, these four books of Odysseus’ adventures are a kind of basic handbook of early Greek beliefs about man and his world. In a storyteller’s mode they present the nature of man, the choices he must make, the nature of his world, the necessity which presses on all men during life, the finality of death, and the ability or lack of ability of men to live successfully with one another. Edith Hamilton (1930), H.D.F. Kitto (1954), and Kenneth Dover (1980) have written books explaining in prose the elements of Greek culture; Odysseus’ tales have the same goal expressed through narrative. This is storytelling at its highest level; it is well done and entertaining, but education, a powerful exploration and reinforcement of cultural values, is implicit in the whole shape and direction of Odysseus’ narrative. It is appropriate that this tale is long and told by the epic’s hero—and little wonder that Homer has Alcinous and Arete praise him for his wisdom.

This broadly defined matrix for the adventures is the key to their placement. Odysseus tells his tales to the Phaeacians as part of his explanation that he does not fit their society and wants to go home to Ithaca; simultaneously Homer is telling Odysseus’ full return to power in Ithaca to a wide audience, showing them the cultural values of the Hellenes and how these values would naturally lead a Greek to choose a proper society. Homer often presents a character’s decision and then, only afterwards, the rationale. For example, in Book 24 of the *Iliad* Achilles announces his decision to return Hector’s body, a decision which is later fully justified in his remarkable meeting with old Priam; while the original decision might seem abrupt, no reader leaves Book 24 feeling that it was wrong or without motive. Only the order of the events is difficult. In Book 1 of the *Odyssey* it is decided that Telemachus will go to inquire about his father; only then is this decision fully motivated. The images of successfully functioning palace societies at Pylos and Sparta in Books 3 and 4 provide compelling justification for Telemachus’ desire to seek a solution to the continuing paralysis in Ithaca. This order, decision prior to rationale, is also evident in larger structures: Book 1 of the *Iliad* shows the decision of Achilles to desert the Greek cause, but the reasoning behind this decision is not fully explored until the Greeks send the ambassadors to him in Book 9. In parallel fashion Odysseus’ decision to leave the islands of Calypso and the Phaeacians is presented in Books 5 and 7—early on and with little rationale. Then in the adventures of Book 9-12 Odysseus has his chance to explain why he chose to leave these islands. Homer in designing these tales has separated out a handbook of Greek beliefs about the world. On the basis of these beliefs Odysseus explains his choice to flee the life of blanketing anonymity found in the presence of the prodigious Kalypso and the soft world of Phaeacia; neither allows him to achieve, to become

himself, or even to earn his own death on his own terms. The Phaeacians were originally neighbors of the Cyclopes, but chose to move their homes to a new land rather than to confront these uncouth savages; Odysseus in his tales makes clear that he will always want to confront that Cyclops and even shout his name in his ear as he is whipping him.

Odysseus has all the traits of the ideal Homeric storyteller: he does tell tales which entertain; he does convey facts and aim to tell truths; he is able to manipulate his stories to suit the audience and the situation in which he finds himself; he improvises using standard and repeated motifs; and he does build his stories on the basis of a matrix, thus giving a different point to each of his tales even when they are shaped from repeated details.

More speculatively—it is clear that Homer himself lies beneath this portrait of the poet. Because he draws on pre-existent folkways, folk-tales, sagas, and myths and then organizes these to express a conception or matrix in his epics, Homer is directly involved in and becomes a commentator on his culture and society. He tells his eighth-century contemporaries tales which came from their past, when their ancestors were far more organized, assertive, and confident, in order to analyze and define the conditions of their present life. His main characters become carriers of his society's culture, and their experiences question the strengths of that society's systems and values as well as illustrate its weaknesses. No character in either epic is able to write, yet many of them attempt to become storytellers in order to provide the only available kind of education in proper behavior for their hearers.¹⁷ The success of storytelling in educating an audience is judged by the tales' effectiveness in providing knowledge of the world, in offering adequate historical/mythological explanations of the current state of affairs, and in matching the complexity of the "real" world of Homer's audience. Homer's success is demonstrated in the positive assessment which the poet leads his audience to place on the lives of his two heroes. He has fashioned his Achilles and Odysseus to be models for his contemporaries as they confront the dilemmas and complexities of their own lives. These two epics, tales of decision-making under the pressure of war and the dogged pursuit of a goal through a series of adventures, spur society's self-exploration and discovery of its nature by probing the amalgam of remembered history, folk-tale, myth, and story to find the fullest expression of the Hellenic heritage.

Both poems are potent texts because they are composed by a thoughtful and powerful storyteller who thought deeply and critically about his society, the mythical heritage of his people, and the future to which their traditional values were leading them. In few social settings have narratives played such a central role, especially since both epics represent

¹⁷ Well illustrated by Scully (1981).

the dominant form of both entertainment and education for a non-literate audience. Any portrait of Homer's oral storyteller would be incomplete without a full assessment of the varieties of storytelling: stories for entertainment, stories for conveying true information, stories for covering up situations and misleading others, and stories to educate. There may, however, be a reflexive quality to this portrait if Homer sets himself as the standard in designing his various storytellers. It was, after all, Homer who understood the full nature of Odysseus' stories, and who understood the desires of Odysseus as a teller of stories true and false, and who appreciated the potential of storytelling for providing education as he designed the character of his hero and master storyteller, Odysseus. Homer himself is not far from this model, a poet with similar aims as he designed his two long epics to convey a view of the world which raises questions about the meaning of ambition, the seeking of honor, proper rewards for the years of a person's life, the balance which must be struck between life and loot, the ethical frailty so evident in mankind, the sternness and unfairness—even the malignity—of the world, the adequacy of the human soul or mind to live successfully in necessary dependence upon one's fellow humans, and finally the ability to come to an understanding of one's proper place in the greater universe. As a result these classic tales told by a storyteller who appreciated the power of narrative both to attract the ear and to educate the mind probably reveal much about the method and intent of Homer, sternly truthful and yet understanding, and most clearly seen in his Odysseus as he teaches his fellow Hellenes of all times about the beliefs, values, and customs of their daily lives through a series of stories.¹⁸

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¹⁸ I wish to express my thanks to W. G. Thalmann and S. P. Scully for their careful reading and criticism of this manuscript.

Appendix
List of Narrative Elements in
Odysseus' False Tale to Eumaeus
(Odyssey, Book 14.199-359)

1. Home = Crete (199)
2. Rich father (200)
3. Several sons in family (200-1)
4. Slave mother (202-4)
5. Noble father (205-6)
6. Division of goods at death (207-9)
7. Unfair allotment (210)
8. Marries noblewoman (211-13)
9. Old man now (213-15)
10. Warrior aided by god (216-17)
11. Boast of being good warrior (218-21)
12. Not lover of house and farm (222-27)
13. Different things please different men (228)
14. "Before the Achaeans came to Troy" (229)
15. Piracy (230-32)
16. Division of spoils after raid (232-33)
17. Prosperity of his house (233-34)
18. Hatred of Trojan War (235- 36)
19. Linked with other major leader (Idomeneus) (237-38)
20. Necessity pressing on hero (238-39)
21. Story of Trojan War (240-42)
22. Plan of Zeus (243)
23. Pirate raid to Egypt (244-48)
24. Banquet before adventure (249-51)
25. Easy voyage (252-56)
26. Arrival in Egypt (257-58)
27. Order men to remain but they disobey (259-61)
28. Men fight and are beaten (262-72)
29. "Would that I had died" (273-75)
30. Surrender in battle (276-79)
31. Acceptance of surrender by King (279-84)
32. Resident alien gets rich (285-86)
33. Phoenician deceives him (287 -92)
34. *Phoenician takes him on ship and tries to sell him into slavery*¹⁹ (293-98)
35. *Storm at sea* (299-305)
36. *Destruction of ship* (305-9)
37. *Zeus gives aid to save him* (310-12)
38. *Carried on beam and goes ashore* (313-15)
39. *Friendly reception when he is found on the beach* (316-20)
40. Story of Odysseus' travels (321-22)
41. Story of Odysseus' riches (323-26)
42. Story of Odysseus' going to Dodona to find out about trip home (327-33)

¹⁹ The italicized items are discussed on pages 392ff. of the text.

43. *King sends teller on his way* (334-37)
44. *Treachery of crew / taken as prisoner* (337-44)
45. *Tie prisoner on ship while crew leaves* (345-47)
46. *Gods aid him in escaping and finding safety* (348-54)
47. *Crew sails on* (354-57)
48. *Gods lead him to a new site* (357-59)

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